

*She thought he was
the one, but then the truth
about his 'recreational'
DRUG use emerged:
he was a secret £30,000 a year
cocaine ADDICT*

As told to SALI HUGHES

I'm still in shock at how abruptly, and bizarrely, my relationship ended. Rob* – the man I thought I'd grow old with – didn't give me the opportunity to gradually mourn the end of our relationship. Other couples get fed up with one another; their sex life slows down, their squabbles escalate into screaming rows. But we went from happy to over in one brief, cold phone call.

My dream collapsed as I sat staring at the dreary walls of the mortgage advisor's office. Rob, my boyfriend of 14 months, was late. We were supposed to be signing our joint mortgage application for the beautiful house we'd found. But sitting there, shifting in my seat, leaving message after message on his switched-off phone, I knew it wasn't going to happen. I knew that, wherever he was, he was on cocaine.

This would have been unimaginable a year ago. I decided within a week of meeting Rob that I'd met my husband, and he always said he'd felt as strongly. The design company where I worked needed a video promo, and Rob, a TV director, was recommended to me. We met to discuss the project and at the end of our meeting, he told me he was taking me on a date. I was smitten by his cheekiness.

A week later, Rob took me to a classical music concert. We chatted non-stop at the bar, laughing at how 'grown-up' we felt. But the attraction was so strong that we didn't make it to the interval. A shared look sent us rushing for the foyer, where we

spent the next hour kissing. For the rest of the night we talked so intimately, about everything from relationships to our complex childhoods, that the bond seemed permanent. We were both 32 and at the same stage of our lives – we had conquered our careers and were ready for something more meaningful. I felt elated, and had to keep reminding myself that this guy was a stranger to me.

The next 10 months were the happiest of my life. Rob was incredibly romantic. He'd cook fantastic meals and book surprise mini-breaks in boutique hotels. He told me constantly that he'd never felt like this before, that I was 'the one'. Marriage seemed inevitable.

From the beginning, it was clear that Rob worked hard and played harder. He had a hectic social life and made no secret of the fact that he dabbled in recreational drugs. I didn't have a ►

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problem with it. In my industry, most people have taken a line or a pill at some point, and I'm no exception. One time, early on in our relationship, we ended up back at my flat after a party, wrap of cocaine in hand. I felt it was a little 'treat', but Rob chopped out line after line. He became wired and hyper, making me feel uncomfortable. The coke ran out quickly and he immediately suggested we get some more. I found his eagerness off-putting. But when I brought it up the next day, he laughed it off and said that when he took drugs he felt he 'might as well go for it'. I'd have been a hypocrite to object. I feel sick when I think of it now.

In other ways, Rob remained the dream boyfriend. Our sex life was wonderful and my friends, thrilled to see me so settled, adored him. But I was upset that I was rarely included in his social life. After the initial honeymoon period, he had less and less time for me. He saw his mates at least four times a week and worked incredibly long hours. Sometimes we'd row about it, but he'd say he needed to work hard to save money for us to buy a place together. I could hardly argue with that, but I was getting impatient. I also didn't see how he could save cash when he was going out so much. I had my deposit ready and waiting (I'd sold an investment flat I'd been renting out) and wanted to get moving. But whenever I asked Rob for time frames, he became defensive and accused me of nagging. One night, paying for dinner, his debit card was declined. I couldn't understand how someone who earned over £70,000 a year could be broke. He said he had a huge tax bill to pay, but something didn't ring true. For the first time, I wondered if he really did want all the things he claimed to.

He started to become unreliable – a last-minute cancellation here, a switched-off phone there. Things came to a head when Rob was booked to work away on location for two weeks before Christmas, and then going straight to stay with friends in Scotland until the New Year. I couldn't let my family down, so I was staying behind. I was crushed. We'd have to spend our first Christmas together communicating by phone and text. But I was wrong to expect even that. I barely heard from Rob all through December. His phone was regularly switched off and, if I did manage to get through, he was distracted. We'd end up rowing until one of us would hang up. I began to wonder if he was having an affair and spent Christmas in tears – lonely, confused and powerless to do anything about it.

He finally came home, three days late. I shouted at him all the way to dinner. When the bill came and Rob's card got declined again, I lost it. But instead of getting defensive, he broke down and confessed that he had a 'Charlie problem'. I sat, stunned, as he revealed that he'd been doing cocaine at least four times a week, sometimes three to four grams in a night. How he'd managed to remain successful in his career was beyond me. A quick calculation on a restaurant napkin revealed that he'd spent around £30k on his druggy lifestyle in the past year alone. He said he felt terrible, that his Christmas binge had made him realise he couldn't keep me *and* his habit. He was quitting – he just needed me to give him a second chance. I was appalled but, if I'm honest, also relieved. The guessing game of recent months was over and not only did I have an answer, I had a man who still loved me and was committed to turning things around.

Things changed overnight. Rob stopped going out and got a personal trainer, getting up at 6am each morning to work out. Six weeks into his recovery, he threw a dinner party for my closest friends and was so warm and attentive that I was beaming with pride. Later, as we loaded the dishwasher, Rob started to talk about how we'd decorate 'our' kitchen. Listening to him, I felt it was more important

than ever to make a fresh start in our own home. I offered to pay the entire deposit myself and we pledged to start house-hunting.

We found a house much quicker than we'd expected and, just three weeks after the dinner party, our mortgage advisor asked us to come and sign the paperwork. But in the days before the appointment, something shifted. Rob cancelled a cinema date, saying he was too tired from work. His texts were sporadic. I think, looking back to that day at the mortgage advisor's, I intuitively knew I'd be stood up and, after an embarrassing wait, I made an excuse and left. Rob finally called as I walked home, claiming to have fallen asleep. I was too hurt to fight.

It was three awful days before he phoned again. But, as let down as I felt, I wasn't prepared for what he had to say: 'I just don't want to be with you. It's all got a bit too serious. I don't think I'm in love with you.' Self-preservation must have kicked in because I stopped listening after that. All I remember is that familiar edge to his voice, the unfeeling chill: he was using.

That was the last time I ever spoke to him. He texted a couple of times afterwards – apologetic, but adamant that it was over. It was like communicating with a stranger. I cried for weeks. I can only describe it as a feeling of bereavement: the man I fell in love with hadn't just dumped me, he no longer existed.

I've done a lot of soul-searching since Rob left me. Without him to answer my questions, I've had no choice but to look inwards. I waver between guilt that I didn't spot the signs of drug abuse earlier and help him, and anger and sheer embarrassment that maybe I was fooling myself all along; that he just wasn't that into me. Perhaps I unconsciously chose to overlook the signs, needing Rob to remain the dream boyfriend he'd so convincingly sold himself as to me.

I know lots of people who have lines of coke here and there, but Rob is different. His drug-taking is a truly destructive force in his life, and in the lives of those around him. If I had to pinpoint the worst aspect of cocaine addiction – and the list is long – it would be that it eventually makes the addict cold to the point of cruelty. The Rob I knew was the most considerate man I had ever met. The one I ended up with didn't care about me, himself or anyone else. ■

**Name has been changed*

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